

What Is a Muckraker?

President Theodore Roosevelt popularized the term *muckrakers* in a 1907 speech. The muckraker was a man in John Bunyan's 1678 allegory *Pilgrim's Progress* who was too busy raking through barnyard filth to look up and accept a crown of salvation.

Though Roosevelt probably meant to include "mud-slinging" politicians who attacked others' moral character rather than debating their ideas, the term has stuck as a reference to journalists who investigate wrongdoing by the rich or powerful.

Historical Significance

In its narrowest sense, the term refers to long-form, investigative journalism published in magazines between 1900 and World War I. Unlike yellow journalism, the reporters and editors of this period valued accuracy and the aggressive pursuit of information, often by searching through mounds of documents and data and by conducting extensive interviews. It sometimes included first-person reporting.

Muckraking was seen in action when Ida M. Tarbell exposed the strong-armed practices of the Standard Oil Company in a 19-part series in McClure's Magazine between 1902 and 1904. Her exposé helped end the company's monopoly over the oil industry.

Her stories include information from thousands of documents from across the nation as well as interviews with current and former executives, competitors, government regulators, antitrust lawyers and academic experts. It was republished as "The Rise of the Standard Oil Company."

Upton Sinclair's investigation of the meatpacking industry gave rise to at least two significant federal laws, the Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act. Sinclair spent seven weeks as a worker at a Chicago meatpacking plant and another four months investigating the industry, then published a fictional work based on his findings as serial from February to November of 1905 in a socialist magazine. It was republished as "The Jungle."

Other prominent investigative journalists of this period include:

- Ray Stannard Baker who investigated coal mining conditions and union practices.
- Lincoln Steffens who profiled corrupt leaders in St. Louis.
- David Graham Phillips who described corruption in the U.S. Senate.
- Edwin Markham and John Spargo who both wrote about child labor.
- Charles Edward Russell who investigated prison conditions.
- Jacob Riis who wrote about life in the slums.

Watchdog Journalism

The term *muckraker* has also been applied to journalists who act as auditors or watchdogs for the public, alerting them of abuses, usually by the rich or powerful.

Earlier journalists in the watchdog tradition:

- Julius Chambers of the New York Tribune had himself committed to the Bloomingdale Asylum in 1872 to investigate allegations of patient abuse. His published accounts led to the release of 12 inmates who were not mentally ill and to a change in the "lunacy law."
- Nellie Bly had herself committed to Bellevue Mental Hospital in 1887 and published her exposé in Pulitzer's *The World*. She also investigated sweatshops, corrupt politicians and other injustices.

- Helen Hunt Jackson (1830–1885) wrote about the abuses of Native Americans, including mistreatment by government agents and violations of treaties. She published extensively, including in newspapers and magazines, though accusations of inaccuracy may have diminished her effectiveness.
- Ida B. Wells wrote about Jim Crow laws, railroad abuses and lynching for the Memphis newspaper *The Free Speech*.
- Ambrose Bierce wrote from 1883 to 1896 about political corruption and *The Central Pacific Railroad*.
- Henry Demarest Lloyd (1847–1903) exposed corruption within Standard Oil.

President Roosevelt said in his muckraker speech, “the underlying facts of human nature are the same now as they were then.” He was comparing George Washington’s time to 1907, but investigative journalists continue to scrutinize those in power.

In 1959 John Howard Griffin, a white man, darkened his skin and rode Greyhound buses and hitchhiked across the South to experience racial segregation firsthand. He used his 188-page diary to write “Black Like Me,” which was first published in *Sepia Magazine*. Griffin did not change his name nor lie about who he was or what he was doing. He had resolved that if he had been asked, he would have told the truth about what he was doing. After the account was published, he and his family were forced to move to Mexico for a time to escape hostility and threats to them in his hometown.

In 1969 Seymour Hersh, who was working as a freelance journalist in Vietnam, reported on the Mai Lai Massacre in which 347 to 504 unarmed civilians were executed by American troops. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1970.

In 2004 Hersh published a series on the mistreatment of Iraqi detainees by American soldiers and defense contractors at Abu Ghraib, Iraq.

In 1972 Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein reported on a “third-rate burglary” at the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate complex. As they investigated the story, Woodward and Bernstein uncovered crimes and “dirty tricks” that led to the highest level of government. Forty White House and administration officials were indicted, and President Richard Nixon resigned.

In 1998 Barbara Ehrenreich, who has a PhD in cell biology, tried living as a minimum wage worker to learn what it was like to be the “working poor.” She took jobs as a waitress, hotel maid, house cleaner, nursing-home aide and store clerk. She attempted to support herself from her wages. Her reports were first published in *Harper’s Magazine* and later as “Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America.”

Muckraking Has Its Costs

Investigative reporters—muckrakers—rarely win popularity contests. American reporters report being harassed, threatened, arrested (and then released), blacklisted, fired and beaten up. At times they simply could not find anyone to publish what they had discovered. But in other countries, questioning power and seeking the truth is a great deal more dangerous. Over a thousand journalists were killed between 1992 and the end of 2014. Many more were imprisoned.

For these journalists, the truth they find raking through the muck is the most valuable crown of all.